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# Thailand: Prescription for Government Crisis



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**Summary**

Nearly four months after surviving a coup attempt, Prime Minister Prem is still unable to assert the strong leadership required to calm Thailand's troubled political scene. Chronic and worsening economic problems, continued infighting among political parties, and an increasingly factionalized military all point toward further uncertainty. The strongest factor maintaining Prem in office is probably the absence of any workable alternative.

A number of issues will test Prem's staying power over the next few months. Prem's role in military promotions, the return of former Prime Minister Kriangsak as a political force, or the emergence of an especially difficult economic issue each has the potential to precipitate a change in the government.

Such a change—whether it comes in the form of a cabinet reshuffle or another coup—is unlikely to bring an early resolution to Thailand's difficulties. There is no successor on the horizon with enough backing to exert the leadership and make the tough decisions required. The royal family and the strong military-business establishment will continue to resist changes that could jeopardize their interests. As a result, Thailand faces the possibility of a prolonged period of weak regimes, which could complicate dealings with the United States on bilateral issues. Ineffective governments also could stimulate domestic sentiment for radical solutions.

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*This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Southeast Asia Branch, Office of Political Analysis. It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations, the National Intelligence Officer for East Asia, and the Offices of Strategic Research, Economic Research, and Geographic and Societal Research. Information as of 24 July 1981 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Southeast Asia Branch, OPA [redacted]*

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Prime Minister  
Prem Tinsulanonda



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### Thailand: Prescription for Government Crisis

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#### Growing Dissatisfaction

Weak political leadership by Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanon is causing growing dissatisfaction with his government. Conditions that gave rise to the attempted coup on 1 April—a lack of leadership at the top, disunity in the coalition government, and military factionalism—show no signs of abating. Few observers—at home or abroad—believe Prem's coalition will ever be capable of resolving the country's complex and longstanding political, social, and economic problems.

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Prem became Prime Minister in March 1980 when public opposition to abrupt increases in fuel and utility prices forced Kriangsak Chamanan to step down. Commander in Chief of the Army, Prem was Kriangsak's Minister of Defense and loyal supporter. Kriangsak's acquiescence, strong royal and military support, and Prem's reputation for honesty made him a virtually unanimous choice. This broad support began to fade as it became clear that he was unwilling or unable to provide the leadership Thailand needed.

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Continued strong palace support—apparently predicated on Prem's clean image and unabashed monarchism—effectively counterbalanced eroding support in other quarters. More than anything else, the presence of the royal family alongside Prem during the coup attempt prompted fence sitters—the majority—to throw their support to him.

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Prem's handling of military personnel involved in the coup attempt has also raised damaging doubts about him. A sweeping amnesty pushed through parliament may have been intended to preclude investigations that could have been personally embarrassing to Prem.

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Former close associates of Prem among the conspirators have apparently been rehabilitated merely by virtue of personal ties to him. Even the leaders of the coup group, who brought the country to the brink of civil war, were let off gently—a dangerous precedent that will do little to discourage potential plotters against the regime.

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Prem took more stringent reprisals against members of the National Police and the Bangkok municipal government who participated in the coup. This has apparently led to a deterioration in internal security. The Prime Minister and the royal family have begun taking unprecedented security

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precautions, such as traveling in bullet-proof limousines. The director general of the police and the governor of Bangkok have been replaced, and Prem's Minister of Interior—who is ultimately responsible for internal security—has been forced to resign. Faced with what the local press is calling a "national crime wave" arising at least in part from police demoralization, the government has assigned Army personnel to police duty. [REDACTED]

#### Restive Power Brokers

The coup attempt left the military—Thailand's foremost power broker—uncommonly factionalized. The largest political force in the country, the military is involved in every facet of Thai political and economic life, and little can be accomplished in the civilian sector without its acquiescence. The impetus for the abortive coup came primarily from junior field-grade officers—unlike most previous Thai coups that tended to be led solely by senior officers—and highlighted the growing generational divisions within the military elite. As a result, the military does not now speak with a single voice; more important, senior officers no longer automatically command the loyalty of their troops. [REDACTED]

Most old-line generals maintain lucrative ties with established commercial interests by serving as board chairmen and by taking bribes to cut through the red tape of the ponderous civil service. Some of the younger, more professional officer corps now moving into middle-ranking positions, however, claim to disdain business, and some profess to favor nationalization of the country's major commercial assets. The plethora of factions, however, does not represent clear-cut divisions by age, ideology, or social background; they often coalesce around a particular officer, while any one individual can belong to more than one faction at a time. [REDACTED]

Members of all factions are trying to exploit the current, unsettled conditions. Titular leader of the abortive coup Gen. San Chitpatima has returned to the Senate, and some of the "Young Turk" colonels who were the driving force behind the coup have announced their intention to enter civilian politics. Some of them were highly popular with large numbers of troops, and this built-in base of support could intensify factional cleavages.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] No group is known to possess sufficient strength at present to pose a serious threat to Prem, but if political maneuvering increases over the next few months, it could bring some now disparate anti-Prem factions together. [REDACTED]

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**Unworkable Coalition**

The cabinet lacks the political influence to control the often undisciplined politicians of the elected lower house of parliament, the National Assembly. Prem's government is made up, in part, of opposing political parties selected to represent the balance of forces in the National Assembly. The largest of Thailand's four major parties, however—the Social Action Party—no longer is included in the cabinet. Furthermore, a significant number of nonpartisan cabinet ministers have been named in an attempt to move toward a so-called "national government" that is above politics. [REDACTED]

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The government thus represents a minority of the legislature. Because the National Assembly is as rent by factionalism as the cabinet, however, no one can mount a serious parliamentary challenge to Prem in the short term. The appointed upper house—the Senate—is composed predominantly of active and retired senior military officers dedicated to preserving their social and economic status, who can be counted on to resist any legislation that implies precipitous change. With its members directly selected for six-year terms by the prime minister upon approval of the king, the Senate is one of Thailand's most effective brakes on the democratic process. All of these factors combine to prevent passage of legislation to solve Thailand's many economic and political difficulties. [REDACTED]

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**Royal Trump**

Increasing interference in the political process by the royal family further complicates the present situation. The monarchy—especially the king—is the paramount symbol of Thai national identity, a unifier that cuts across lines of narrow self-interest. The palace blessing is needed to legitimize political power and thus is impossible to ignore. The April coup plotters disregarded this factor, which proved their undoing when the king sided with Prem. [REDACTED]

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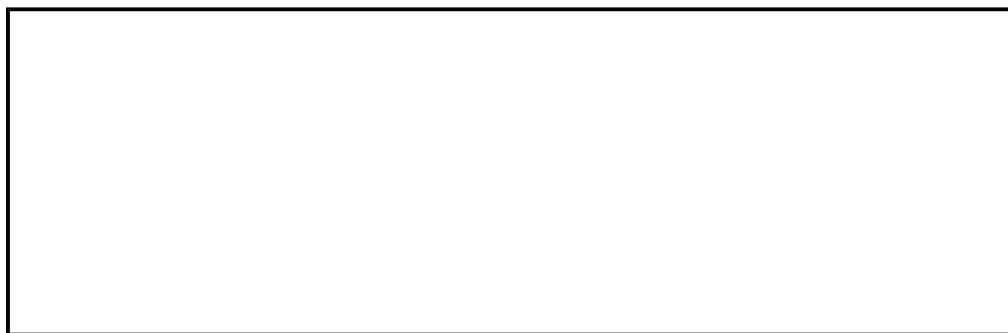
Royal guard honors king and queen on king's 50th birthday in 1977. [REDACTED]



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The king's abandonment of the monarchy's accustomed aloofness from politics has exacerbated present political tensions. Some political leaders suggest delicately that the king should return to a role that is above the turmoil of day-to-day politics. Others undoubtedly are calculating how best to take advantage of the king to further their own political ambitions. Many Thais fear that the monarchy has lost some of its prestige by its blatant role in foiling the coup [redacted]

#### Potential Bones of Contention

Prem will have difficulty allaying the spreading doubts at home and abroad about the future of his regime. Indeed, he has admitted to colleagues that the cabinet, as currently constituted, cannot last. The leading members of the coalition, whose participation stems largely from self-interest, likewise are skeptical that it will be viable over the long run. A number of contentious issues singly or in combination could be the catalyst precipitating a change of government, either legally or otherwise [redacted]

Prem's most immediate hurdle— a decision he must make before 1 October—is who will succeed him as *commander in chief* now that he has decided to step down. The recent death of the logical successor to Prem, Gen. Amnat Damrikan, removed a major motive for Prem to extend; Amnat was both powerful in his own right and an ally of Prem's potential political rival, former Prime Minister Kriangsak. The candidate most likely to become commander in chief now, Gen. Prayut Charumani, lacks the personal power base to pose a threat to Prem's position as prime minister. Prayut is a staff officer who has never had a major troop command, however, and his appointment could presage a continued deterioration in control of the military. [redacted]

*Decisions on other military promotions*, which also must be made by 1 October, will require a delicate balancing act from Prem. October is traditionally the "coup season," when disgruntled officers who believe they have been unfairly passed over for promotion conspire against the government. A major rift could develop between officers favored by the palace especially by the queen—and those who have no palace ties. Prem could easily find himself in a bind: a royal protege such as First Army

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Commander Gen. Athit Kamlang-ek may expect his already meteoric career to rise even faster, but this would cause Prem problems with Athit's subordinates who dislike him. [REDACTED] 25

Perhaps the most fundamental problem is the growing *dissatisfaction among the military* with the whole democratic system. Trained in a tradition disdainful of partisan politics, many military officers increasingly blame party leaders for the crisis in government. Individuals from all ranks of the military are talking about the abolition of a cabinet based on the parliamentary system, and its replacement with a handpicked, apolitical government more easily dominated by military interests. [REDACTED] 25

Real or perceived *economic problems* could also create political upheaval. Press accounts and private comments point to government "insolvency" an overstatement of the country's economic straits, but a reflection of the magnitude of the problem as perceived by the political elite. Moreover, many Thais fear that the negative press reports — such as an *Asian Wall Street Journal* article that cited the unsettled military situation on Thailand's borders as a warning to foreign investors — will discourage capital investment the country cannot afford to do without. The recent devaluation of the Thai currency may reduce the large foreign trade deficit, but it will also exacerbate inflation at home. [REDACTED] 25

Any of Prem's opponents could exploit such economic difficulties to encourage a public outcry. Although unprovoked demonstrations are unlikely, further price increases affecting petroleum, electricity, and foodstuffs combined with instigation by political activists could — as in the past — bring people into the streets. The crisis that brought down the previous Kriangsak government centered on economic issues, and a scandal over oil imports forced Prem to reshuffle his cabinet last March. [REDACTED] 25

Farsighted programs to meet the challenge of the country's economic problems cannot be expected from the current government. The cabinet lacks a sense of direction in economic policy because responsibilities are distributed among politically divided portfolios. Strong senior military and business interests oppose the enforcement of any legislation that jeopardizes their entrenched and often monopolistic enterprises. [REDACTED] 25

Prem's natural inertia is likely to inhibit his making the tough political choices needed to make civilian government more effective. The enactment of controversial *constitutional reforms* now under consideration has the potential to strengthen significantly the hand of the civilian politicians at the expense of the military. In marked contrast to some military who believe more autocratic rule would bring more effective government, the reforms would encourage the steady movement toward greater democracy

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in Thai political life. A new law intended to make political parties more representative and lessen the Senate's predominance awaits implementation. Provisions still being debated include a requirement that the prime minister be an elected official. A highly popular land reform bill now under consideration would tread heavily upon influential toes. Although Prem initially supported it, he will come under heavy pressure from important backers to renege; whichever side he takes, Prem will come under attack.

**Former Prime Minister Kriangsak**, a skilled political infighter, could benefit from those reforms that would increase the role of the legislature because he is trying to take the parliamentary road back to power. Organizing his own political party, Kriangsak is running in an August byelection in northeast Thailand. He has considerable residual support in the Senate - two-thirds of which was appointed during his tenure - and some active military backing. Prem probably considers Kriangsak as the only major threat to his position. Kriangsak's return could also upset the ascendancy of royal proteges in the military because he is not part of the palace coterie.

Prem could *invite the Social Action Party back* into the government to counterbalance Kriangsak's quest for power. The party, under the leadership of another former prime minister, Kukrit Pramot, strongly opposes Kriangsak's reemergence on the political scene. Such a move, however, could cause other problems because the Social Action Party is widely disliked at all levels of the military.

## Outlook

Change could come in one or more of several forms:

- A coup for or against Prem.
- Dissolution of the National Assembly and new elections.
- A cabinet reshuffle that would either rebalance the representation of political parties or disregard them altogether.

Prem may also choose to resign - he has steadfastly maintained that he serves only at the behest of the king and does not really want the job of prime minister. Given the unwieldiness of Thai political institutions, an extralegal challenge has a better chance for success than a legislative confrontation. Prem remains more inclined to have change thrust upon him than to initiate change himself.

A cabinet reshuffle seems most probable over the short term, but even this maneuver would be beset with difficulties. To be meaningful, a reshuffle would have to return economic portfolios to the Social Action Party, and

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this would be bitterly contested by political rivals currently in the cabinet. The party's radical programs for development, although welcomed by foreign investors, endanger vested Thai commercial interests. The military, in particular, is wary of the civilian-supported Social Action Party. Its return would bring economic expertise to the cabinet, but could cause a backlash that might sweep Prem away. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED] A coup against Prem cannot be ruled out, but present military factionalism makes it difficult for any group to be assured of enough support to succeed. Many senior military leaders whose support would be crucial are concerned that Thailand may be developing a reputation as a nation too prone to instability. The single strongest factor maintaining Prem in office, however, probably is the absence of any acceptable alternative. In such a situation, Thailand will continue to be unusually preoccupied with political maneuvering and the ineffectual Prem will be powerless to stem mounting coup rumors, security scares, and government scandals. [REDACTED]

Whether or not there is a change in government, Thailand's economic and political problems are likely to persist. Caught between autocratic and democratic ideals—and trusting neither—the Thai seem headed for a period of weak, fractious governments. Prolonged experience with weak leaders and ineffective governments could well stimulate sentiment for radical solutions. Thai political history suggests that either the right or the left could spearhead such a movement. [REDACTED]

Thailand's dealings with the United States on bilateral issues could suffer as a result of continuing weak government leadership. The Thais have failed to live up to US expectations to suppress narcotics trade, for example, despite Bangkok's express intention to prosecute aggressively drug traffickers. Distracted by political infighting, Thailand's ability to deliver on its promises may erode even further. [REDACTED]

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